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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 000367

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NEA/IPA FOR
WILLIAMS/SHAMPAINE/BELGRADE; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON MUGHRABI GATE

REF: JERUSALEM 339

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Tourists and visitors were allowed access to the Temple Mount/Haram a-Sharif via the Mughrabi Gate February 21 for the first time in more than two weeks. Access had been restricted by Israeli officials following protests and occasional violence surrounding the excavations at the Mughrabi Gate ramp. Age restrictions on Muslim worshippers remain in place, however, and Waqf Administrator Adnan Hussein told ConGen that his primary concern is the excavations at the Mughrabi Gate ramp, not access for tourists. Israeli human rights NGO Ir Amim founder Danny Seidemann said the excavations have revealed Byzantine mosaics and Islamic artifacts in the areas where the support columns for the new ramp may be placed and remains of Mughrabi Quarter homes on the old earthen ramp.

12. (C) Comment: Excavations at the Mughrabi Gate ramp continue to have the potential to ignite clashes. Palestinian suspicions were fueled by February 17 Israeli media reports on the discovery of a Muslim prayer room three years ago when the ramp collapsed in February 2004, but which the Israeli Antiquities Authority did not reveal until February 16. Post has offered to facilitate discussions between Hussein and Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski. Hussein confirmed to poloff February 16 that he will not meet Lupolianski or other leaders of the Jewish and Christian communities until the excavations are halted. End Comment.

WALLES